

The Washington Post

Duncan Speech Seen as Politics

[FINAL Edition]

The Washington Post - Washington, D.C.

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Date: Dec 8, 2005

Start Page: B.01

Section: METRO

Text Word Count: 760

Full Text (760 words)

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A day after Montgomery County Executive Douglas M. Duncan called for a hard look at the management of the county's planning department and ordered work halted on another project, some county officials said his remarks did little to resolve the controversial construction irregularities in northern Montgomery.

Some council members, as well as planning staff, said that in his state of the county address, Duncan tried to take undue credit for attempts to resolve problems at Clarksburg Town Center. Others said he was using his speech to boost his political fortunes.

"I think it was a campaign speech," said County Council member Marilyn Praisner (D-Eastern County), a longtime Duncan antagonist. Duncan is seeking the Democratic nomination in next year's race for governor.

Council members were receptive to Duncan's call for a 9 1/2-cent reduction in the property tax rate, which could slow the increase in bills and provide as much as \$400 in relief to the owner of a \$400,000 house.

Most reserved judgment, though, until they see Duncan's entire budget plan, due in March. The proposed rate cut, to 92.5 cents on \$100 of assessed value, could cost the county \$128 million, a loss that could be cushioned by a surplus in the county coffers. Last year, the council reduced the rate 4 cents, to \$1.02 on every \$100 of assessed value.

"It may indeed be an easier effort than it was the last time around," council member Nancy Floreen (D-At Large) said. "Last year, the council took the lead. It is easier when Doug is on the same side."

Duncan used Tuesday's speech to apologize for the problems at Clarksburg Town Center, a new community rising northeast of Germantown, where residents were the first to unearth evidence that what was being built was not what was promised. He proposed appointing an ombudsman to deal with the problems there and issued a stop-work order for an adjacent community where he said he had unearthed new problems.

Duncan also urged the County Council to consider whether to replace Planning Board Chairman Derick Berlage, who oversees the board that has been blamed for many of the problems. His term expires in June.

Council President George L. Leventhal (D-At Large) said there isn't a majority ready to decide Berlage's fate before June. Leventhal plans to circulate a memo to other members this week on the matter.

"I think the Clarksburg situation makes all of us look bad, and the task ahead is to get a handle on that," Leventhal said.

Council member Michael Knapp (D-Upcounty) said he thinks the council should act quickly on Berlage. "We need to make a decision one way or another as soon as possible after the first of the year," said Knapp, whose district includes Clarksburg. "The council needs to take action one way or another."

Knapp and other council members said Duncan's comments about a Clarksburg ombudsman were a bit of revisionist history.

Knapp said it was he who first urged the administration a year ago to appoint a senior-level staff person. When Duncan submitted his budget in the spring, it included a mid-level position. The council thought it deserved more stature. "I was hopeful a couple weeks ago we were past blaming people, so it's troubling people are still taking shots at the council," said Knapp, who ran on a slate with Leventhal in 2002.

Also, planning officials said they were surprised by Duncan's announcement that he was issuing an immediate stop-work order development, Clarksburg Village, being developed by McLean-based Elm Street Development. Duncan said the Department of Services, which he controls, halted work there because of discrepancies over lot sizes. "Permitting Services has taken it on its initiative to check for violations in Clarksburg," Duncan said.

Planning officials disputed that. "We notified them on lot size issues a month or two ago, so I am not sure what they mean by 'it initiative,'" said Rose Krasnow, chief of the development review division.

"Park and Planning is not getting the job done when it comes to enforcement," said Duncan's spokesman, David Weaver. "We Clarksburg Village violations to their attention earlier this year on multiple occasions, and nothing happened."

Officials also said that they had been working closely with the Duncan administration for months on Clarksburg Village and that agreed to undertake a thorough review before halting any work. "It was a rather sudden change," said Bill Mooney, a former Duncan administration official who is acting director of the planning department.

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